

Chapter 10. Karma

Meaning and general nature of *karma*

The Sarvāstivāda Abhidharmikas are quite aware of the profundity- and ultimately inconceivability of certain teachings of the Buddha as verbalization of His perfect enlightenment. Among these is His doctrine of karma. The the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra goes so far as to declare that, of all the Buddha's discourses, those dealing with karma are the most profound. It should be noted at the very outset that the karma doctrine of the Sarvāstivāda is quite in keeping with the early Buddhist teaching that karma is neither fatalistic nor completely bound by mechanical rigidity. It is undoubtedly inspired by the Buddha's own doctrine on karma which is the Middle Way between absolute determination and absolute freedom, being in conformity with the universal principle of conditioned co-arising (Pratītyasamutpāda).

The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra gives a threefold meaning of the term karma:

- (1) karma in the general sense of an action or deed (kriyā);
- (2) karma as the ecclesiastical proceedings used for regulating the affairs of the sevenfold Buddhist community- bhikṣu, bhikṣuṇī, etc.;
- (3) karma as a moral action on account of which the effect can be distinguished as desirable or undesirable.

The third meaning refers to the moral action which principally- but not absolutely determines the subsequent experiences of one's existence. It is to karma in this last sense that the doctrine here pertains. The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra, however, also observes that people in the world generally apply the word karma to what is, in fact, its fruit (karma-phala). In brief, karma in this last sense refers to the retribution causes (vipāka-hetu) which effect a specific existence, either in their capacity as the principal projecting cause or as causes that assist in completing the specific details of the particular sentient existence. The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra explains more specifically that these retributive causes are called karma on account of their fundamental role in determining the various spheres (dhātu), planes (gati) and modes of birth (yonī) of a sentient being's existence and in differentiating the various types of persons (pudgala) with their various life-span, physical appearances, social status, etc.

While all these retributive causes can be considered karma inasmuch as they contribute towards a being's rebirth, some are responsible for projecting a particular type of existence (e.g., human), and others contribute in terms of the specific details (e.g., the life span of the human, etc.); and among all the different types of karmic contribution, that from volition is the most predominant. It is from this perspective that sometimes karma is made to refer only to that which projects a specific existence and, at other times, it is only volition that is spoken of as karma in the proper sense. From this same perspective, it is stated, at yet other times, that it is not only karma alone that projects an existence.

Three types of *karma* and the primary role of *cetanā*

There are three types of karma recognized in the Sarvāstivāda: mental, bodily and vocal. Correspondingly, karma is said to be established on a three-fold basis in terms of originating cause (samutthāna), the mental karma is established; in terms of

intrinsic nature, vocal karma; in terms of supporting basis (āśraya), bodily karma. This three-fold division of karma is also correlated with another three-fold signification of karma: It is karma because;

- (i) it has efficacy, that is, vocal karma,
- (ii) it entails movement, that is, bodily action, even though there is no real movement as such,
- (iii) it is volitional, that is, “mental karma which wills the two former actions”.

The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra explains that cetanā comprises all that is mental karma — whether that which projects an existence (i.e., the group-homogeneity) or that which completes its specifics; whether with-outflow or outflow-free; whether pertaining to the mind or to the five sensory consciousnesses- since all these karma-s have the characteristic of being volitional activities (abhisamkāra). Group homogeneity is a force that acts on members of a group together. For example, a Thai, British, Chinese or a Cambodian go to the same class. Every one is the same being. When we are hungry we eat, when we are happy we laugh as we all have the same common things. So the members of the group have similar desires, similarities and common characteristics. This is made possible by a force called group homogeneity.

The notion of mental karma as the originating cause setting the other two types of karma into operation shows clearly that in spite of their insistence that karma comprises cetanā - as well as cetayitvā-karma, the Sarvāstivādins assign the primary karmic role to cetanā. This emphasis is distinctively brought out in the following catechism in the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra:

Question: All with-outflow dharma-s, whether skillful or unskillful, are capable of effecting desirable or undesirable retribution fruits. Why is cetanā alone, and not other dharma-s, said to be capable of differentiating the desirable or undesirable fruits?

Answer: It is so said because cetanā is most excellent [in this process]: cetanā has the most excellent strength in effecting a desirable or undesirable fruit.

The agent of *karma*

Given the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence- interpreted to its logical extreme as that of momentariness- and of non-substantiality (nairātmya), can it be said that the same person who incurs a karma experiences the effect himself? The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra examines this question, and explains as follows:

- i. From a certain point of view it can be said so: Although the skandha-s, āyatana-s and dhātu-s of a being are different in each moment of their serial continuity, yet there is an overall integrity- each series is distinct from another.
- ii. From another point of view, it can be said that the doer and the experience are different- for instance, a being who has incurred a karma as a human, experiences its effect in a different plane of existence.
- iii. From yet another point of view, it can be said that no one incurs any karma and no one experiences the effect- for all dharma-s are without a Self, empty of a person (pudgala); all karma-s are “devoid of a doer and an experienter,

there being only the agglomeration of the conditionings which arise and cease [momentarily]”.

Samghabhadra cites the following two lines of a stanza which he asserts are the Buddha's own words denying a truly, independently existing agent of karma:

There is karma, there is vipāka;
The doer is not apperceived (na upalabhyate/na vidyate).

This, he says, nevertheless does not amount to the denial of agency in every sense. It denies only a really existent Self that leaves one group of skandha-s and continues with another group. It is for the sake of showing that the doers are none other than the conditionings (saṃskāra) themselves, constituting a serial continuity of causes and effects, that [the Buddha] says further: 'This being that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises.' (asmin satīdaṃ bhavati / asyo'tpādād idam utpadyate) - Nyāyānusārā, 485a.

The Sarvāstivāda shares the basic Buddhist tenet that the unenlightened worldling experiences dukkha in saṃsāra on account of his karma; and karma is generated because of defilements: defilement → karma → dukkha. All dukkha ceases when karma is transcended. Defilements are not only the generating cause of karma. It is by virtue of defilements that karma accumulated become necessarily productive of a retribution. Without them, karma-s are incapable of effecting a new existence.

In fact, "It is not the case that an arhat does not have the indeterminate karma-s conducive to a rebirth. But on the account of the absence of the defilements, they become incapable of producing a rebirth." That is, while karma is the direct cause for a retribution, it requires the defilements as the necessary supportive conditions for the process.

Classification of *karma*

Various classifications of karma are given in the Sarvāstivāda texts, among which the following are the main ones:

- 1) volitional karma (cetanā) and karma subsequent to willing (cetayitvā);
- 2) bodily, vocal and mental karma-s;
- 3) informative (vijñapti) and non-informative (avijñapti) karma-s;
- 4) skillful (kuśala), unskillful (akuśala) and morally neutral (avyākṛta) karma-s;
- 5) karma-s which are with-outflow (sāsrava) and outflow-free (anāsrava) karma-s;
- 6) (i) meritorious (puṇya) karma- skillful actions pertaining to the sphere of sensuality,
(ii) non-meritorious (apuṇya) karma- unskillful actions pertaining to the sphere of sensuality, and
(iii) immovable (āneñjya) karma — skillful actions pertaining to the upper spheres;

- 7) (i) black karma yielding black retribution — impure action generating disagreeable (amanojña) retribution;
- (ii) white karma yielding white retribution — action of rūpa-dhātu which is always pure generating agreeable (manojña) retribution;
- (iii) black-white karma yielding black-white retribution — pure action of kāmadhātu, being mixed with the impure, generating a mixed retribution;
- (iv) neither-black-nor-white karma yielding no retribution outflow-free action which destroys the other three types of action;
- 8) karma-s conducive to pleasant experience (sukha-vedanīya), to unpleasant experience (dukkha-vedanīya), to neither pleasant nor unpleasant (adukkhāsukha-vedanīya) experience;
- 9) karma-s experiencible in this life karma-s experiencible in the next life (upapadya-vedanīya) and karma-s experiencible in a future life subsequent to the next (apara-paryāya-vedanīya);
- 10) determinate (niyata) and indeterminate (aniyata) karma— e.g., a karma conducive to desirable (or to undesirable or neutral) experience is not necessarily retributed; but when it is actually retributed, it is necessarily experienced as a desirable retribution;
- 11) a karma that is done and one that is accumulated (upacita);
- 12) projecting (ākṣepaka) and completing (paripūraka) karma-s.

An examination of the Karma theories of Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Sāṃmitīya Sarvāstivāda

Avijñapti is a psychological concept of this school. The term means un-manifested, unexpressed or latent karma, on the basis of three phases time of existence. *Avijñapti* is responsible to invisible karma. (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, XVII, v3-5) The *avijñapti* is of two-fold, viz., unmanifested matter (*avijñapti-rūpa*) and unmanifested activity (*avijñapti-karma*). But when examine closely, it becomes quite clear that it is neither matter nor mere activity. On one hand, it is not mere matter like visible and audible objects because it always implies some kind of activity, on the other , it is not mere activity because it is a product of material elements. This is due to the fact that *avijñapti-karma* partakes of the nature of its cause, namely *vijñapti-karma* which is produced by body and speech both of which comes under the category of matter (*rūpa*). Due to the twofold nature of *avijñapti*, both *avijñapti-rūpa* and *avijñapti-karma* are used in general to mean unmanifested activity. According to the Sarvāstivāda School, as soon as one performs a physical act or expresses an idea, that is *vijñapti* - karma, a latent energy is impressed in the individual which they called *avijñapti*. Once produced by *vijñapti* – karma, a *vijñapti* – karma develops on it own accord, without the agency of thoughts, whether a person is waking, sleeping or absorbed in deep contemplation.

Sāṃmitīya

Avipraṇāśa, as document and debt. (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā XVII, V13-19:

Moreover, I shall expound the following thought which is appropriate and which has been extolled by the Buddhas, the self-enlightened ones and the disciples.

Like an imperishable promissory note, so is debt as well as action. It is fourfold in terms of realms and indeterminate in terms of primal nature.

That [i.e., the imperishable karma] would not be relinquished by simple relinquishing. It is to be relinquished only through cultivation. Thus, through the imperishable arise the fruit of action. If it is to be relinquished through simple relinquishing or through the transformation of action, then there would follow a variety of errors such as the destruction of actions. Of all these actions, whether dissimilar or similar, belong to certain realms, only one would arise at the moment of birth [of a being]. That [imperishable] arises in the present life, corresponding to all the actions having dual natures [similar and dissimilar, good and bad, etc.] and stays so even when matured. That [imperishable] ceases as result of the interruption of the fruit or as a result of death. Herein, a distinction between one with influxes and the one without influxes is to be signified.

Avipraṇāśa is like a document, and karma is like a debt. *Avipraṇāśa* can not be relinquished by karma but by cultivation (practice *anāśrava*). It can be interrupted by the fruit of karma or death. *Avipraṇāśa* is neutral (*avyākṛta*); is not karma which can exist whether *kusala* or *akusala*.

Avipraṇāśa is like a document, and karma is like a debt. As in the case of a debt, the debt document is not the money itself; nevertheless money can be claimed on the basis of the document. This repaying according to document is comparable to the particular way a *vipaka phala* is to be experienced in accordance with the particular nature of the *avipraṇāśa*.

Sautrāntika (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā XXVII, V7-11):

Karmas perfume the flowing mind (*citta*) and become seeds (*bīja*), as the phenomena of seed, spouse and fruits.

Theravāda

A real, and in the ultimate sense true, understanding of Buddhist karma doctrine is possible only through a deep insight into the impersonality (*anattā*) and conditionality (*paṭiccasamuppāda*, *paccaya*) of all phenomena of existence.

"Everywhere, in all the forms of existence ... such a one is beholding merely mental and physical phenomena kept going by their being bound up through causes and effects.

"No doer does he see behind the deeds, no recipient apart from the karma-fruit. And with full insight he clearly understands that the wise ones are using merely conventional terms when, with regard to the taking place of any action, they speak of a doer, or when they speak of a receiver of the karma-results at their arising. Therefore the ancient masters have said:

'No doer of the deeds is found,
No one who ever reaps their fruits;
Empty phenomena roll on:

This view alone is right and true.

'And whilst the deeds and their results
Roll on, based on conditions all,
There no beginning can be seen,
Just as it is with seed and tree.' " (Visuddhimagga XIX)

Others

Doer and the agent of karma are either identity or in difference.
Nagarjuna disproves all above views to show the Buddha's real intention.

Nāgārjuna:

V.21: Why does action not arise? Because it is without own-nature. Since it has not arisen, it will not cease to exist.

V.26: This action is on the nature of defilements but the defilements do not exist in reality (*tatvataḥ*). If the defilements do not exist in reality, how can action exist in reality?

V.27: Action and defilements are said to be the conditions of bodies. If the action and defilements are empty, what can be said of the bodies?

V.30: If action and agent do not exist, how could there be a result stemmed from the action? If the result does not exist, how could there be an enjoyer [of the result]?

V.31-32: Just as the Teacher, by his supernatural power, magically creates a magical figure, and that magically created figure further magically creates another [figure], similarly, whatever action may he perform, an agent has an image of a magically created figure; for example, a magically created figure magically creates another figure.

V.33: Defilements, actions, bodies, agents, and results have an image of the city of *gandharvas* and resemble a mirage or a dream.

Paths of *karma* (*karma-patha*)

The teaching of the ten paths of skillful and unskillful karma (*karma-patha*) have formed a major ethical guidance among the Buddhists from the Buddha's time. The Sarvāstivādins explain that these ten paths of karma are intended by the Buddha to include the most important skillful practices and the gravest unskillful practices. The ten unskillful paths of karma are:

1. taking life (*prāṇātipāta*),
2. taking what is not given (*adattādāna*),
3. sexual misconduct (*kāma-mithyācāra*),
4. false speech (*mṛṣā-vāda*),
5. malicious speech (*paśunya*),

6. harsh speech (pāruṣya),
7. frivolous speech (saṃbhinna-pralāpa),
8. covetousness (abhidhyā),
9. hatred (vyāpāda),
10. false view (mithyā-dṛṣṭi).

The ten skillful ones are the opposites of these, i.e., abstention from killing, etc. These are skillful actions which are with-outflow, i.e., still conducive to rebirths in saṃsāra. The first three are bodily actions; the next four, vocal; and the last three, mental. The root-causes of the ten unskillful paths of karma are the roots of unskillfulness — greed (lobha), hatred (dveṣa) and delusion (moha): 1, 6 and 9 are achieved through hatred; 2, 3 and 8 through greed; 10 through delusion; 4, 5 and 7 through any one of the three roots. Likewise, correspondingly, the ten skillful paths of karma are achieved through the three roots of skillfulness. In the sphere of sensuality, all the 10 skillful and unskillful paths of karma can be acquired.

It is emphasized that a mere conventional moral observation, without a dominant mental determination, is not a path of karma. Conversely, if one harbors an evil intention of, say, disrupting the unity of a harmonious community — whether one succeeds or not, one commits the path of karma of malicious speech. Each path of karma is divisible into nine grades — weak-weak (i.e., the lowest of nine grades), and so on, up to strong-strong (i.e., the highest of nine grades). Thus, although murder leads to an undesirable rebirth, the particular plane of existence into which the murderer is going to be reborn will depend on the grade of gravity of the action. The same applies to the other paths of karma. Among the ten unskillful ones, it is false view — which denies cause and effect — that cuts off the roots of skillfulness: The strong-strong root of skillfulness is cut off by the weak-weak false view — up to, the weak-weak root of skillfulness by the strong-strong false view.

The paths of karma are called thus because they are the paths based on which the volition — karma — that originates them has its operation:

“Because it operates as they operate; it moves as they move — it creates karmically in conformity with their force... They are paths of karma because they are traversed by the volition: because the volition that originates the bodily and vocal karma operates through the latter as the object.” They constitute the paths “through which the volition has its movement and operates to its accomplishment”. Thus, volition is not called a path of karma. “Just as the road traversed by the king is called the road of the king, and it is not the king; likewise it is called the path of karma because it is traversed by volition, and it is not volition.” Accordingly, among the ten paths of karma, the first seven are both karma — being bodily and vocal karma in nature, as well as paths of karma — being the paths for their originating volition. The last three mental ones are only paths of karma inasmuch as they serve as the paths for their conascent volition, but not karma.

Excepting sensual misconduct, all the other principal karma-patha-s have necessarily non-informative, but not necessarily informative [karma]. If an action done by oneself is immediately accomplished, then it has informative karma. If it is done through another person, or if at the time of its accomplishment the informative [karma] has not necessarily non-informative [karma]... At the stage of subsequent

action, there is necessarily non-informative [karma]; not necessarily informative [karma] — [the latter] exists if a [consecutive action] is done, not otherwise.

All these, then, point clearly to the role of the non-informative karma as contributive to karmic retribution. Even after the series of a non-informative karma has ended — for example, when the person dies — as in the case of a past volition and informative karma, the non-informative karma too continues to be connected with the personal series (santati) by virtue of the continuous acquisition-series which ends only when the fruit is actualized.